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SUBJECT: CLANDESTINE IMMIGRATION-IN SEARCH OF ELDORADO

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Goaded by their families who sell everything to give them their shot, young men, women and even children are connected with unscrupulous middlemen who can charge them over a thousand dollars to spend up to 12 days on rickety boats in sometimes doomed attempts to make it to Spain or Europe in search of a better life. In the last few years, clandestine immigration has become a major concern for Senegal. While 2007 has seen a significant reduction in attempts, the issue remains at the forefront of public and government consciousness. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 31,863 people arrived in the Canary Islands in 2006 with an estimated death toll of 4,000 to 7,000. End Summary.

A Personal Story

¶2. (U) Ousmane Balde is an unemployed 25 year-old information technology specialist who twice attempted to leave Senegal. Citing a lack of work, he argued that he wants a better future and that many of his friends who have successfully made the trip are now working in Madrid and Barcelona. Ousmane not only had the support of his family but they and his friends also assisted him with the CFA 500,000 cost (USD 1060) of his first trip. Ousmane told us that they left St. Louis, in Northern Senegal, around midnight and that the 15 meters long by 2 meters wide pirogue had so many people aboard that he could not sit down. The pirogue was stocked with food, fuel, and water. As the night wore on, it became apparent that the boat was not seaworthy so the captain returned to shore the next morning. No one got a refund.

A Descent into a Nightmare

¶3. (U) Ousmane's second paid attempt, along with 87 adults and 5 children, started under better circumstances. As the journey went on, however, the would-be immigrants had to throw their belongings overboard in order to keep the leaking boat afloat. After spending nine harrowing days in the Atlantic Ocean (four without food) the captain of the pirogue admitted that he had made an error in navigation and that they had passed their destination of the Canary Islands. During the trip there was fighting, people were sick to the point of vomiting blood, no one slept, large waves threatened to flood or overturn the boat, and at one point a whale twice the length of the boat seemed to be toying with them. Ousmane also recounts how, half way through the trip, they passed a Russian fishing trawler whose amused sailors only took some photos and left. In response to the captain's admission of his mistake, some fishermen on the boat assisted in piloting a course to Mauritania, after which they sailed back to St. Louis. Several of the passengers had to be hospitalized for physical and psychological injuries. Ousmane says he is now done trying to leave Senegal and is working to persuade people to stay. However, with so many desperate would-be migrants still hoping for better opportunities no

matter the risk, these perilous journeys will assuredly continue to be undertaken.

Why do they do it?

¶4. (U) According to the eminent Professor Penda Mbow of the West African Research Center, who in 2007 with the collaboration of the Dutch Embassy conducted an in-depth study entitled "Clandestine Immigration: The Profile of Candidates," fishermen are the main instigators of clandestine immigration. She says that depleted stocks mean that fishermen have to now travel further and further for less and less catch. The fishermen have realized that they can make more money using their boats to transport migrants - the price per person of one trip can range from CFA 400,000 to CFA 1,000,000 (USD 900 - USD 2000).

¶5. (SBU) Mbow opines that societal factors are at the heart of the problem. Many marabouts (Muslim spiritual leaders) encourage and actively support those who want to leave and solicit other people in their local community to donate money as well. Mothers sell their belongings with the expectation that, once established, the migrant will send money back. A telephone call from Spain is the sign of success and encourages others to do the same. Mbow sympathizes with the migrants because the reality is that economic opportunities are sorely lacking for most young Senegalese. Her hope is that the government will become more involved in assisting youth with training in technical fields.

¶6. (SBU) Nicolas Sonko, a journalist for the Walfadjri daily, has worked extensively on the issue and argues that as well as a lack of jobs, Senegalese society is changing. Families no longer espouse the shared education and family unity concepts that were so important in the agrarian culture that once prevailed. Thus

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parents, who are now looking for a quick fix to their economic problems, actively encourage their children to leave with the hope that they will work and send money back home.

¶7. (U) Importantly, many youths attempt the trip because legal immigration is not an option. Many young, working-age men with little to no education try their luck at getting a visa at the U.S. and other Western embassies. They come with their new passports posing as traders, religious leaders, and tourists. At USD 100, a nonimmigrant visa fee is a bargain compared with the more expensive, clandestine alternative. However, even honest applicants find that the doors are closed to them. One young man, making no attempt to hide his intentions, told the consular officer in his B1/B2 visa interview that he was responsible for his entire family's economic well-being and that he just wanted to work. He had already been refused a visa by the Spanish, Portuguese, and British embassies. "What can I do?" he asked as he was denied yet again.

So what's being done?

¶8. (SBU) Lieutenant Colonel Alioune Ndiaye is Senegal's Representative to the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union (FRONTEX). FRONTEX is an EU border security organization through which Italy, Spain, and Portugal are providing assistance to Senegal along with materiel to enhance surveillance patrols along the coast. Ndiaye said that in 2006, there were two to three departures per day with the majority leaving from St. Louis. However, with increased patrols, the departures have decreased to about one every two weeks leaving from as far south as Mbour. This change in location increases the journey from as little 3-4 days to 10-12 days.

¶9. (SBU) Confirming what Balde told us, Ndiaye said that departures mostly take place during the night but that in the morning, a FRONTEX surveillance flight can quickly identify a boatload of people. A FRONTEX ship then intercepts the pirogue and they are redirected back to Senegal. In 2007, over 10,000 people were stopped by FRONTEX. In September 2007, FRONTEX intercepted a

pirogue with 179 people on board comprised of 125 Senegalese, 32 Gambians, 14 Guineans, 6 Malians, and the rest from other West African countries.

¶10. (SBU) Ndiaye said that the brains behind these operations are difficult to identify, but that they are primarily Senegalese - he doubts the existence of any major international trafficking groups. Many times passengers never see the organizer unless the organizer is the captain of the boat. Different migrants are assigned to obtain different materials. Thus, one person will get the motor, one the food, and a third the boat. Senegalese captains are especially sought after because they can navigate the waters.

¶11. (U) He went on to say that clandestine immigration is affecting the local fishing industry, which is subsidized by the government. Normally, a boat can be used for many years, but for a trip it is used once and then destroyed in Spain. Fishermen are also selling their boats to those who want to make the voyage. Ndiaye believes that people will continue to attempt to leave because they see it as the best way to help their families. A person sending back CFA 200,000-300,000 CFA (up to USD 600) per month to their families will enable them to live quite well.

International Efforts

¶12. (U) The International Organization for Migration has been working to encourage people to immigrate under a legal program set up between Spain and Senegal. Another area where IOM has been successful is in increasing public awareness of the dangers of the trip and the conditions found upon arrival in foreign countries. Shocking images on the television are most powerful in persuading people not to attempt the trip. IOM has also implemented some pilot programs in areas where the likelihood of immigration is highest. They assist youth with sports and other programs. For example, one program allows young people to propose a project and receive assistance in bringing the project to fruition. IOM assists with oversight and, if needed, with a little cash (up to 20 percent) to get started. Other programs are in the vocational training areas of construction, farming, and fishing. IOM admits it has limited resources that include four separate teams and 12 vehicles. In Europe, IOM and FRONTEX work together to help repatriate people. IOM said that many government officials admit that remittances help the country's economy, but that they are also concerned about the impact of clandestine immigration on the national image.

SMITH